

Footwear for Orientation and Mobility

Jennifer Roark, M. Ed. COMS,
Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
Blind Services Division

You may hear your Orientation and Mobility Specialist talk about the importance of supportive footwear. What does that mean, and why it is important?

First, as a person with a visual impairment you may need to exercise additional caution when walking. Objects that you may not be able to see in your direct path such as broken glass, wire, and other dangerous objects can lead to falls or injuries to your feet, as well as potentially serious infections. (This is especially important for diabetics who may have neuropathy.) Therefore, you should wear closed-toe supportive sneakers for your safety and comfort during O&M training. Supportive footwear supports the whole body. Flip-flops, sandals and shoes made of soft material (such as Crocs) do not provide the support you need to walk safely.

Secondly, the feet are the foundation to the body. Think of the foundation of a house. A weak foundation under a home can lead to uneven floors, sinking areas and cracks in the walls. Likewise, feet without proper support put stress on the body, which can cause pain in the legs, knees, and lower back. When this happens, people are less likely to want to practice their mobility skills, which can help make one feel more isolated and less independent. Talk about a vicious cycle!

This handout provides some basic guidelines on what to look for in supportive shoes. It is important, though, that you consult with your doctor regarding specific foot issues, especially if you are diabetic.

What is A Supportive Shoe?



Heel does not fold in.



The outside of the heel should not give.



The heel should be even on both sides.



Shoe bends in the toe box and not in the middle.

(Images: <https://www.hruska-clinic.com/updated-hruska-clinic-shoe-list-sept-2020>)

It may take some time to find shoes that are right for you. A doctor or physical therapist can help analyze your gait pattern and recommend shoes to meet your specific needs. A sporting goods or running store will offer shoes in a wide variety of widths, lengths and features. If you cannot find shoes in your size, talk to the store associates. Many can order shoes to fit. Keep an open mind to other brands and styles. Remember, it is about comfort and support.

ARCH SUPPORT

Good arch support is essential in a supportive shoe. As our bodies age, we may find that our shoe needs change as well. Some may find that they are fighting the dreaded “spare tire” of middle age, as well as aches and pains that seem to come unexpectedly. Many inexpensive or fashionable sneakers of our youth may not provide adequate support for our changing bodies. The type of arch you have can help you determine which shoes to buy. A good way to tell is to place a piece of paper on the ground. Dip each foot in shallow water, then step on the paper. (Depending on your vision, you may need a sighted friend to help.). If most of your foot, appears on the paper, you likely have fallen arches and need extra support. If only a part of your foot is visible, you may have a normal or high arch. Again, a physical therapist, podiatrist or a specialty running store employee can advise you on which shoes best fit your unique needs. If you are diabetic, talk with your doctor about special diabetic footwear. The right amount of arch support can prevent painful foot problems in the future.

Overpronation

Flat feet can be a particular problem in that they can cause overpronation. This means that as you step, the outer edge of the heel hits the ground first, causing your foot to roll inward. As we age and often fight to maintain a healthy weight, our tendons and ligaments stretch which causes our feet to flatten, which leads to overpronation. This condition can make sprained ankles, shin splints, Achilles tendonitis and plantar fasciitis more likely.

In my own experience, I've found that motion-control or stability-running shoes offered the best support for my feet. Both of these shoe types offer extra support in the arch and midsole, allowing the foot to stay in a neutral position. Stability shoes offer needed support for those with a small amount of overpronation, while motion-control shoes provides greater rigidity for those who hurt more severely.

You also may find that you need additional support from insoles. Running stores will have both shoes and insoles to meet your needs. Don't be intimidated by running shoes; they're not just for runners! Buy the best quality shoes that your budget will allow. After all, good support for your feet is priceless!

Diabetic Foot Care

If you are diabetic, it is highly important that you or a sighted friend inspect your feet every month and have a professional clip your toenails. If you notice any redness, warmth, pain or soreness in your feet, talk to your healthcare provider immediately. Some individuals develop extremely dry skin that can crack and bleed, which is an opening for infection. There are lotions made for diabetics and your doctor can recommend a brand that would help you most. Many healthcare professionals recommend that diabetics wear closed-toed shoes to prevent foot injuries.

Final Tips for a Great Fit for All.

1. When going to buy shoes, bring the socks that you intend to wear with them.
2. Try to shop at the end of the day when your feet are at their largest point.
3. Measure both feet, as your foot size often changes over the years.
4. Make sure there is a little wiggle room in the toe box.
- 5.** Don't force your feet into shoes that don't fit or lack support in an effort to save money. Doing so can lead to more costly and painful problems down the road.